The Guide:
SES Qualifications Guide

In the 21st century, Government executives face special challenges. They must be visionary leaders with a strong commitment to public service. They must be able to apply "people skills" to motivate their employees, build partnerships, and communicate with their customers. Finally, they need solid management skills in order to produce optimum results with limited resources.

The Office of Personnel Management helps make sure the Government selects strong leaders by developing the core qualifications used to test new career appointees to the Senior Executive Service (SES) and by administering peer review boards which evaluate whether candidates possess these essential leadership qualifications. The Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) are based on extensive research of the attributes of successful executives in both the private and public sectors; they are a collaboration, reflecting the best thinking of many senior executives and associations, as well as agency human resources professionals.

Replacing the ECQ's described in the August 1994 issue of Guide to SES Qualifications, the new ECQ's are:

- Leading Change
- Leading People
- Results Driven
- Business Acumen
- Building Coalitions

These ECQs and their underlying leadership competencies and key characteristics were issued in September 1997. The competencies identified the personal and professional attributes that were critical to successful performance in the SES. The key characteristics identified the activities or behaviors associated with the ECQs.

In 2006, OPM completed a review of the ECQs which included the leadership competencies and key characteristics. The review resulted in:

- Development of fundamental competencies
- Revisions to ECQ-specific competencies
- Modified definition of each ECQ
- Removal of the key characteristics

The fundamental competencies and ECQ-specific competencies replace the leadership competencies described in the January 1998 version of the *Guide to SES Qualifications*.

Senior Executive Service candidates will find this publication useful as they assess and describe their executive qualifications, in preparation for review by selection officials.

In addition to helping applicants, the Guide will be useful to individuals charged with reviewing executive qualifications, including agency personnel and executive development specialists and members of agency Executive Resources Boards.

Current vacancies at departments and agencies appear in the Federal Government's official job website located at http://jobsearch.usajobs.opm.gov/ses.asp

Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ's)

The Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs) define the competencies needed to build a federal corporate culture that drives for results, serves customers, and builds successful teams and coalitions within and outside the organization. The Executive Core Qualifications are required for entry to the Senior Executive Service and are used by many departments and agencies in selection, performance management, and leadership development for management and executive positions.

Fundamental Competencies

Competencies are the personal and professional attributes that are critical to successful performance in the SES. The fundamental competencies are the attributes that serve as the foundation for each of the Executive Core Qualifications. Experience and training that strengthen and demonstrate the competencies will enhance a candidate's overall qualifications for the SES.

Definition: These competencies are the foundation for success in each of the Executive Core Qualifications.	
Competencies	
Interpersonal Skills	Treats others with courtesy, sensitivity, and respect. Considers and responds appropriately to the needs and feelings of different people in different situations.
Oral Communication	Makes clear and convincing oral presentations. Listens effectively; clarifies information as needed.
Integrity/Honesty	Behaves in an honest, fair, and ethical manner. Shows consistency in words and actions. Models high standards of ethics.
Written Communication	Writes in a clear, concise, organized, and convincing manner for the intended audience.
Continual Learning	Assesses and recognizes own strengths and weaknesses; pursues self-development.
Public Service Motivation	Shows a commitment to serve the public. Ensures that actions meet public needs; aligns organizational objectives and practices with public interests.

Q: Do I need to address each Fundamental Competency within each Executive Core Qualification (ECQ)?

A: No. Because the Fundamental Competencies are cross-cutting, they should be addressed over the course of the ECQ narrative. It is not necessary to address them directly as long as the narrative, in its totality, shows mastery of these competencies on the whole.

Q: Will I be assessed on all of the competencies?

A: No. You will be assessed on each ECQ, not on the individual competencies (although you are expected to demonstrate mastery of the Fundamental Competencies somewhere within your narrative statement).

Q: What happened to the key characteristics?

A: We reviewed the key characteristics and determined this information was not essential to the application process. For further clarification of the ECQs, candidates may refer to the competency definitions.

Q: What if I have an SES vacancy announcement posted right now? Will I need to remove it or add the new ECQs?

A: No. Any vacancies posted prior to October 1, 2006, will not need to be updated to reflect the new ECQs. Only those vacancies posted after October 1, 2006, will need to reflect the new ECQs. However, during this transition, it is preferable for human resources officers to attach the vacancy announcement to the application package to ensure the ERB and QRB members are aware of the applicable ECQ definitions for each vacancy.

ECQ 1: Leading Change

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to bring about strategic change, both within and outside the organization, to meet organizational goals. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to establish an organizational vision and to implement it in a continuously changing environment.

Competencies	
Creativity and Innovation	Develops new insights into situations; questions conventional approaches; encourages new ideas and innovations; designs and implements new or cutting edge programs/processes.
External Awareness	Understands and keeps up-to-date on local, national, and international policies and trends that affect the organization and shape stakeholders' views; is aware of the organization's impact on the external environment.
Flexibility	Is open to change and new information; rapidly adapts to new information, changing conditions, or unexpected obstacles.
Resilience	Deals effectively with pressure; remains optimistic and persistent, even under adversity. Recovers quickly from setbacks.
Strategic Thinking	Formulates objectives and priorities, and implements plans consistent with the long-term interests of the organization in a global environment. Capitalizes on opportunities and manages risks.
Vision	Takes a long-term view and builds a shared vision with others; acts as a catalyst for organizational change. Influences others to translate vision into action.

ECQ 2: Leading People

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to lead people toward meeting the organization's vision, mission, and goals. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to provide an inclusive workplace that fosters the development of others, facilitates cooperation and teamwork, and supports constructive resolution of conflicts.

Competencies	
Conflict Management	Encourages creative tension and differences of opinions. Anticipates and takes steps to prevent counter-productive confrontations. Manages and resolves conflicts and disagreements in a constructive manner.
Leveraging Diversity	Fosters an inclusive workplace where diversity and individual differences are valued and leveraged to achieve the vision and mission of the organization.
Developing Others	Develops the ability of others to perform and contribute to the organization by providing ongoing feedback and by providing opportunities to learn through formal and informal methods.
Team Building	Inspires and fosters team commitment, spirit, pride, and trust. Facilitates cooperation and motivates team members to accomplish group goals.

ECQ 3: Results Driven

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to meet organizational goals and customer expectations. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to make decisions that produce high-quality results by applying technical knowledge, analyzing problems, and calculating risks.

Competencies	
Accountability	Holds self and others accountable for measurable high-quality, timely, and cost-effective results. Determines objectives, sets priorities, and delegates work. Accepts responsibility for mistakes. Complies with established control systems and rules.
Customer Service	Anticipates and meets the needs of both internal and external customers. Delivers high-quality products and services; is committed to continuous improvement.
Decisiveness	Makes well-informed, effective, and timely decisions, even when data are limited or solutions produce unpleasant consequences; perceives the impact and implications of decisions.
Entrepreneurship	Positions the organization for future success by identifying new opportunities; builds the organization by developing or improving products or services. Takes calculated risks to accomplish organizational objectives.
Problem Solving	Identifies and analyzes problems; weighs relevance and accuracy of information; generates and evaluates alternative solutions; makes recommendations.
Technical Credibility	Understands and appropriately applies principles, procedures, requirements, regulations, and policies related to specialized expertise.

ECQ 4: Business Acumen

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to manage human, financial, and information resources strategically.	
Competencies	
Financial Management	Understands the organization's financial processes. Prepares, justifies, and administers the program budget. Oversees procurement and contracting to achieve desired results. Monitors expenditures and uses cost-benefit thinking to set priorities.
Human Capital Management	Builds and manages workforce based on organizational goals, budget considerations, and staffing needs. Ensures that employees are appropriately recruited, selected, appraised, and rewarded; takes action to address performance problems. Manages a multi-sector workforce and a variety of work situations.
Technology Management	Keeps up-to-date on technological developments. Makes effective use of technology to achieve results. Ensures access to and security of technology systems.

ECQ 5: Building Coalitions

Definition: This core qualification involves the ability to build coalitions internally and with other Federal agencies, State and local governments, nonprofit and private sector organizations, foreign governments, or international organizations to achieve common goals.	
Competencies	
Partnering	Develops networks and builds alliances; collaborates across boundaries to build strategic relationships and achieve common goals.
Political Savvy	Identifies the internal and external politics that impact the work of the organization. Perceives organizational and political reality and acts accordingly.
Influencing/ Negotiating	Persuades others; builds consensus through give and take; gains cooperation from others to obtain information and accomplish goals.

Executive Core Qualifications

Leading Change	Leading People	Results Driven	Business Acumen	Building Coalitions
Definitions				
This core qualification involves the ability to bring about strategic change, both within and outside the organization, to meet organizational goals. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to establish an organizational vision and to implement it in a continuously changing environment.	This core qualification involves the ability to lead people toward meeting the organization's vision, mission, and goals. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to provide an inclusive workplace that fosters the development of others, facilitates cooperation and teamwork, and supports constructive resolution of conflicts.	This core qualification involves the ability to meet organizational goals and customer expectations. Inherent to this ECQ is the ability to make decisions that produce high-quality results by applying technical knowledge, analyzing problems, and calculating risks.	This core qualification involves the ability to manage human, financial, and information resources strategically.	This core qualification involves the ability to build coalitions internally and with other Federal agencies, State and local governments, nonprofit and private sector organizations, foreign governments, or international organizations to achieve common goals.
Competencies				
Creativity and Innovation External Awareness Flexibility Resilience Strategic Thinking Vision	Conflict Management Leveraging Diversity Developing Others Team Building	Accountability Customer Service Decisiveness Entrepreneurship Problem Solving Technical Credibility	Financial Management Human Capital Management Technology Management	Partnering Political Savvy Influencing/Nego

Qualifications Review Board Process

Membership in the Senior Executive Service (SES) demands leadership, professional integrity, a broad perspective, and a commitment to the highest ideals of public service. This is the essence of the "corporate SES" and the foundation for the executive qualifications that are the primary selection criteria for entry into the SES. These qualifications represent the critical skills senior executives need to succeed in the Government today and in the future. While technical job-specific qualifications are important, the keystone of the SES is executive leadership.

All senior executives must have their executive qualifications certified by an independent Qualifications Review Board (QRB) before being appointed as career members of the SES. The QRB review and certification is the last critical step in the SES selection process. QRBs determine whether the candidate has the requisite executive qualifications for entry into the SES.

This independent and objective review is intended to ensure that the Government is hiring executives with the qualifications needed in today's environment, especially the ability to lead in times of change, and that technical expertise does not outweigh leadership skill in the selection of new senior executives.

- Role of the Senior Executive
- Executive Core Qualifications
- Agency Merit Staffing
- QRB Administration
- QRB Operations
- QRB Certification
- Certification Criteria

Role of the Senior Executive

While OPM convenes Qualifications Review Boards and provides staff support, the Boards are composed of members of the SES. Federal executives need to develop a sense of ownership and pride in a set of common goals, values, and attitudes that extend beyond individual aspirations and transcend their commitment to a specific agency mission or profession.

As members of the governmentwide SES corps, senior executives share the responsibility for ensuring that new members have the leadership qualifications needed for success as a Federal executive. Participating in QRB certification gives SES members an opportunity to exercise this responsibility. Further, after the QRB experience, SES members are an excellent resource to agency management and Executive Resources Boards for advice on improving evaluation and selection criteria as well as to SES candidates for guidance on developing executive skills and suggestions on documenting Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs).

Executive Core Qualifications

OPM identifies the fundamental executive qualifications in terms of the key skills that are essential for success as a senior executive.

Executive competencies have evolved over the years, in both the private and public sectors, to enable senior management to respond to the developments in the business culture, advances in technology, and the challenges of change. From 1979 to 1994, executive functions and competencies in the Federal sector were characterized by six executive activity areas and QRB certification required proficiency in four of the six management activities.

In 1994, OPM formulated five new Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs), based on extensive research and input from agency senior executives and executive personnel staffs, to focus on skills needed to manage programs and processes. We also mandated that new executives be fully qualified in all five ECQs or present a plan to acquire them.

In September 1997, OPM updated these core qualifications to change the focus from management to leadership and the ability to drive change. The current qualifications are:

- Leading Change
- Leading People
- Results Driven
- Business Acumen
- Building Coalitions/Communication

The ECQ subject areas are basically the same, but the focus shifted from management to leadership; from efficient processes to bottom-line results. Under the revised qualifications, executives are expected to do more than just have a strategic vision -- they must lead change. They must lead and motivate people, not just manage human resources. In planning and evaluating programs, they must show results. Even though Government is not a business, they nevertheless must have a sharp business sense. They must move beyond using communication skills to represent the organization to using communication for team and partnership building.

The basic qualifications are substantially the same, but executives and executive candidates need to think and act in new ways. Successful performance in the SES requires competence in all five ECQs. They are interdependent - successful executives bring all five to bear when providing service to the nation.

Agency Merit Staffing

An agency Executive Resources Board (ERB) conducts the merit staffing process that results in the selection of a candidate for initial career appointment in the SES. The ERB assesses the technical or professional and the executive qualifications of the candidate, and makes the final determination about whether the candidate meets the technical job-specific requirements. However, the ERB does not make the final determination about the candidate's executive qualifications - this determination is made by the independent Qualifications Review Board administered by OPM.

After a tentative selection is made, the agency forwards the candidate's application package (i.e., "case") to OPM for presentation to a QRB. The agency requests QRB certification on the basis of one of the following three criteria: **(A)** demonstrated executive experience; **(B)** successful completion of a formal, OPM-approved SES candidate development program; or **(C)** possession of special or unique qualifications that indicate a likelihood of executive success. (See Certification Criteria at the end of this document)

QRB Administration

OPM staff review each case to ensure that appropriate merit staffing procedures were followed; that the documentation of executive core qualifications is adequate; and that the required documents are included. After reviewing and resolving any discrepancies, the case is forwarded to the QRB for action.

Qualifications Review Boards are convened weekly, generally for three hours. Depending on the case load, additional Boards may be convened on an ad hoc basis. The Boards usually meet in Washington, DC, although on occasion they are held in other cities to give field executives an opportunity to participate in the selection of SES members. OPM maintains a roster of senior executives available to serve as QRB members, based on names provided by agencies or volunteers.

An OPM staff member serves as a QRB Administrator for each Board, gives instructions about the certification process, answers questions from QRB members, and provides any other guidance and staff support as appropriate.

QRB Operations

Membership

QRBs are composed of three members of the SES, each from a different agency. At least two Board members must be career appointees. If possible, one of the three executives will have previously served as a QRB member.

ECQ Documentation

Candidates may use their entire record to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for entry into the SES. This can include professional experience in the public and private sectors as well as volunteer experience, education and training, awards, and other accomplishments. Board members should fairly assess all factors presented by the candidate.

Candidates are encouraged to follow a "challenge-context-action-result" model in documenting their executive qualifications: describe a specific problem or goal (challenge); describe the individuals/groups they worked with and/or the environment in which they worked to tackle a particular challenge (context); discuss specific actions taken to address a challenge (action); and give specific examples of the results of the actions to demonstrate the quality and effectiveness of their leadership skills (result).

Case Review

The QRB reviews one case at a time. The three Board members independently review the materials presented in support of a candidate's executive qualifications and decide if the candidate's experience meets the ECQ requirements. The QRB does not rate, rank, or compare one candidate's qualifications against those of other candidates, nor does it discuss merit staffing, technical qualifications, or SES position designation issues. Rather, Board members judge the overall scope, quality, and depth of a candidate's executive qualifications within the context of the five Executive Core Qualifications.

Board members do not limit their assessment of executive qualifications to the candidate's ECQ documentation statement, they consider all of the information included in the application package. The candidate's qualifications taken as a whole must demonstrate that the individual has the leadership qualities needed in today's SES.

If a case involves a QRB member's employing agency, or if a member otherwise believes he/she cannot provide an impartial review, the concerned QRB member will be excused from that case. If there is no longer a career majority as a result, the case will be held over and submitted to the next QRB.

QRB Certification

After the QRB members review a case, the final decision to approve or disapprove is by majority vote. If one or more of the members want to disapprove the case, the Administrator will ask for a general discussion of the candidate's qualifications to determine if the Board can arrive at a consensus. If the QRB disapproves the case, the Administrator asks for specific reasons and/or guidance to pass along to the submitting agency.

Case Disposition

A QRB either approves or disapproves a case based on the information provided. The QRB may recommend additional training or developmental experiences for the candidate which will be relayed to the agency, but the approval is not made contingent on the individual receiving such training or experience.

If a case is approved, the Administrator or Board members record the QRB decision and any recommendations, and the selecting agency is notified of the approval and the recommendations. The agency may then appoint the individual to the SES.

If a case is disapproved, the Administrator records the QRB decision and documents the specific reasons for the disapproval and any QRB comments or recommendations to be passed along to the submitting agency. The agency will be advised that it has the option of submitting the same case to the next scheduled QRB or having the case returned for revision or alternative action. If the disapproval was based on inadequacy of the case presentation, OPM staff will advise the agency on ways to improve the case to enhance its chances for approval if resubmitted.

(**Note:** If a QRB case is disapproved a second time, a new case on the same individual for the same position may not be submitted until the candidate has acquired additional qualifying experience in those areas where deficiencies were noted by the QRB. OPM generally requires that the agency hold a new merit staffing competition to credit the additional experience - the closing date of the new announcement should be at least 12 months later than the closing date of the original announcement.)

Confidentiality

QRB deliberations are privileged. While the names of those who have served as QRB members may be made public, the names of members of individual Boards are not released.

Certification Criteria

Agencies ask that Qualifications Review Boards certify a candidate's executive qualifications on the basis of one of the following three criteria:

Criterion A- Demonstrated executive experience;

Criterion B- Successful participation in a formal, OPM-approved SES candidate development program; or

Criterion C- Possession of special or unique qualities that indicate a likelihood of executive success.

The Qualifications Review Boards convened weekly certify cases on the basis of Criterion A or Criterion C.

Ad hoc Qualifications Review Boards are convened to certify cases on the basis of Criterion B. In these cases, the agency's Executive Resources Board first certifies that the candidate has successfully completed all Candidate Development Program (CDP) activities. OPM staff and an ad hoc QRB review each candidate's training and developmental experience to assure that it provides the basis for certification of executive qualifications.

Criterion "A" Cases (Demonstrated Executive Experience):

SES candidates are considered under Criterion "A" when their overall record (professional and volunteer work experience, education and training, accomplishments and awards) demonstrates application of the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform at the SES level. Candidates must demonstrate executive experience in each of the five Executive Core Qualifications.

When a QRB approves a Criterion "A" case, it can recommend that the candidate's demonstrated experience be supplemented with developmental assignments or management training. However, the candidate's certification is not contingent upon completion of such development.

Key documents provided for an "A" case:

- Application forms for Federal employment required by the agency;
- Brief (no more than 10 pages) written executive qualifications statement that evaluates the candidate's background as it relates to each of the five Executive Core Qualifications;
- The vacancy announcement.

Criterion "C" Cases (Special/Unique Qualities):

Criterion "C" cases are rare and appropriate only when exceptional candidates with demonstrated executive experience are not available. This type of case involves a candidate whose professional/technical background makes him/her particularly well-suited for the SES vacancy, but who lacks demonstrated experience in one or more of the executive core qualifications. However, they must have the potential for quickly acquiring full competence in all of the core qualifications. For example, an attorney may have outstanding legal skills and in-depth knowledge of the specialized field for which the SES position is responsible, but he/she may not have had the opportunity to manage human, financial, material, and information resources.

An agency may propose such a candidate for consideration under Criterion "C" by:

- Documenting why the candidate's special and unique qualifications make him/her a superior choice for the specific vacancy and discussing the candidate's potential to succeed in the SES. (Such documentation must include a reference addressing the candidate's unique qualifications and executive potential.)
- Presenting a plan to strengthen the candidate's executive qualifications. This Individual Development Plan (IDP) should include developmental assignments and/or formal training that are focused on the specific executive core qualifications that need to be enhanced.

IDP - Individual Development Plan

A plan of developmental assignments and formal training an employee will undertake to gain competency in the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ's). Usually developed in conjunction with the employee's supervisor, or a mentor who is (or has been) a member of the SES.

Key documents provided for a "C" case:

- Application forms for Federal employment required by the agency
- Brief (no more than 10 pages) written executive qualifications statement that assesses the candidate's experience and potential for success in the SES, in relation to the five Executive Core Qualifications
- A written description of the candidate's unique and special qualifications that make him/her a superior choice for the SES position for which selected
- A written reference by someone familiar with the candidate's executive qualifications
- An Individual Development Plan that shows how the candidate will obtain the Executive Core Qualifications
- The vacancy announcement.